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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 000826

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SUBJECT: MEXICO VIEWS TIMING OF PRESIDENT OBAMA'S FIRST TRIP TO LATIN AMERICA AS OPPORTUNE

REF: MEXICO 0131

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Reaction to the announcement of President Barack Obama's first official visit to Mexico scheduled for April 16-17 has been generally positive. Media commentators expect Obama's meeting with President Felipe Calderon to focus on shared efforts to confront organized crime, economic challenges and illegal immigration. Some take Mexico's being the first country Obama will visit in Latin America as a signal of the importance the U.S. assigns Mexico; others conjecture the visit comes out of recent tension over security and trade. END SUMMARY.

Positive Reaction to the Announcement

¶2. (SBU) Reaction among the political class to President Obama's upcoming travel to Mexico has been generally optimistic. Silvano Aureoles Conejo, a Senate caucus leader for the opposition Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), called the visit "a good sign for Mexico" that suggests a "change in posture" from the White House. PAN Senator Cesar Augusto Leal of the Foreign Relations Commission told Poloff that President Obama is wildly popular in Mexico and such a high profile visit would go a long way to cement a relationship that has come under some "short-term stress." Jorge Montano, former Ambassador of Mexico to the U.S., remarked that a visit within one month by the USG's two most senior officials -- the President and the Secretary of State -- reflects U.S. "special treatment" for Mexico.

Recent Tension in the Relationship

¶3. (SBU) Many analysts quoted by media outlets highlighted recent hand-wringing in the U.S. over Mexico's struggle with growing violence. Jose Luis Valdes Ugalde of the Center of Investigation on North America characterized the U.S.-Mexico relationship as "in chaos" and said the visits of Clinton and Obama were designed to get it back on track. El Universal cited Andrew Selee, Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute, describing the urgency for dialogue before crises begin to drive the relationship. Lorenzo Meyer (Reforma) said that Obama was assuming the mode of past U.S. Presidents in paying attention to Mexico only because of its political failures. Jose Carreno Figueras (El Milenio) presented a more balanced view that the purpose of the visit was to support Calderon's war on drugs. He expressed surprise the visit had been scheduled so soon, especially since Secretary Clinton would be visiting before the end of the month. However, he speculated, tension and recent

recrimination left Obama no choice but to schedule the meeting on the eve of his participation in the upcoming Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago.

¶14. (SBU) Rodrigo Ivan Cortes, foreign policy advisor to PAN Senator Adriana Gonzalez, told Poloff that the visit posed high stakes for President Calderon. While President Obama's visit demonstrates a desire for genuine partnership, Calderon will need to press him for concrete measures to address outstanding security and trade concerns, such as arms trafficking and the recent trucking dispute. Mexico's president has the opportunity to demonstrate strength, but risks attack by the opposition if he appears incapable of obtaining meaningful commitments from his U.S. counterpart.

Mexico Visit First to Region

¶15. (SBU) While focused on elements of bilateral tension, most commentators also injected a note of pride that Mexico would be the first country in Latin America President Obama visits.

Few lost sight of the fact that Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula was the first Latin American leader to be received by President Obama, with some reports suggesting that Lula had tried to convince Obama to visit Brazil before any other Latin American country.

¶16. (SBU) COMMENT: Reaction in Mexico to the visit so soon in the new U.S. president's administration has been generally optimistic. President Obama is already popular with the public and in political circles. His decision to visit

MEXICO 00000826 002 OF 002

Mexico early on in his administration only reinforces the positive view of him. Analysts and officials alike seem more than willing to give him the benefit of the doubt regarding any perceived lack of experience in the region, and express hope that the visit will move the relationship beyond recent rhetorical tension. END COMMENT.

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